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W.P. 1039

TO MOST MEN THE RISING CLAMOUR OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR CAME LIKE THE MOUNTING WAIL OF A WARNING SIREN. BUT TO OTHERS, AS IT WAS WITH GEORGE DANIEL COONEY, IT SOUNDED LIKE A BUGLE CALL OF HOPE AND RELEASE... RELEASE FROM A DRAB AND HUMDRUM EXISTENCE...

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 1963

Chapter I. THE DONKEY

THE SCENE WHERE GEORGE COONEY'S FUTURE CHOSE TO DEMAND ITS FIRST REPAYMENT WAS SET IN A SPOT FAR REMOVED FROM ANYTHING HE HAD IMAGINED — THE BURNING BATTLEGROUND OF THE ALLIED NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN.



SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE DESERT STOOD A WATER WELL, ONE OF THOSE WOODEN CREAKING DEVICES KEPT IN MOTION BY A BLINDFOLDED PLODDING ASS.



BUT IN THIS CASE, THE PLODDER WAS NO THIN-RIBBED BEAST BUT A MAN — A MAN WHO LOOKED IN THE LAST EXTREMITY OF EXHAUSTION, AND WATCHING HIM WITH CRUEL HUMOUR, STOOD A BIG BURNOUSED FIGURE WIELDING A STICK...



THE DUST-CAKED, FLY-TORMENTED FACE HAD THE GLAZED LOOK OF A MAN DRIVEN BEYOND CONSCIOUS EFFORT, ONLY THE MECHANICS OF MOVEMENT REMAINED...



IF THE SWEAT-SODDEN SHIRT HELD NO CLUE TO HIS IDENTITY, THERE WAS NO MISTAKING THE KHAKI SHORTS AND FLYING BOOTS OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE OF THE DESERT.



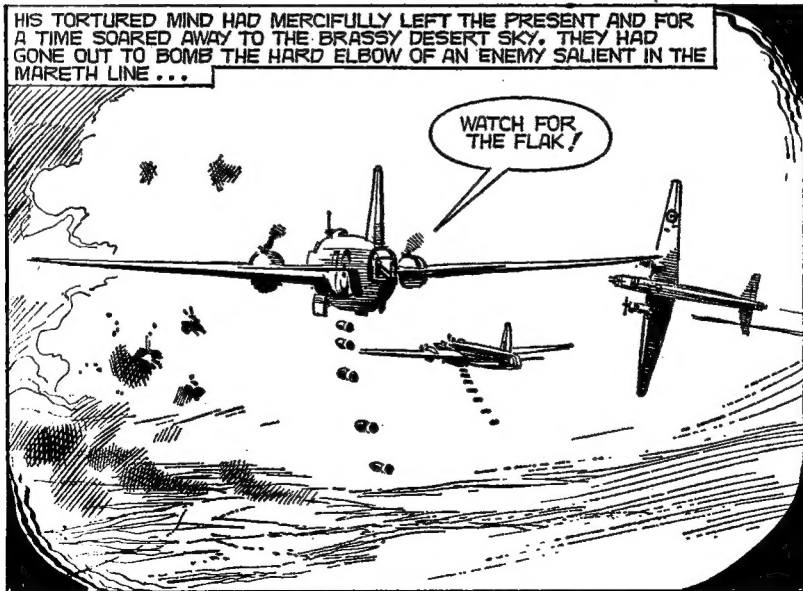
ROUND AND ROUND, LIKE THE CYCLE OF ETERNITY ITSELF, WENT THE DRAGGING FLYING BOOTS. NEARBY A KNOT OF ARABS LOOKED ON WITH THAT BLANK INDIFFERENCE TO SUFFERING FOUND IN THE PRIMITIVE DESERT DWELLERS...



THE MAN, GEORGE DANIEL COONEY, ONE-TIME CANADIAN FARM-BOY, LIFTED HIS SWIMMING VISION AND BEGAN TO SEE HIMSELF, A VAGUE ELUSIVE SHAPE, AT THE TAIL GUNS OF A VICKERS WELLINGTON BOMBER....



HIS TORTURED MIND HAD MERCIFULLY LEFT THE PRESENT AND FOR A TIME SOARED AWAY TO THE BRASSY DESERT SKY. THEY HAD GONE OUT TO BOMB THE HARD ELBOW OF AN ENEMY SALIENT IN THE MARETH LINE....



THEN HAD COME THE HIGH WHINING CHORUS OF ATTACKING MESSERSCHMITTS, THE DREAD PUNK OF ENEMY CANNON GUNS.

SCHNELL!
GET INTO THE
ENGLANDERS!

COONEY'S AIRCRAFT, S FOR SUGAR, WAS HARRIED DEEP INTO THE WASTELANDS OF THE DESERT. HE HEARD HIS OWN VOICE CRACK WITH THE STRAIN...

THEY'RE STILL
COMING, SKIPPER...!
KEEP WEAVING!

WHAT DO
YOU THINK I'M
DOING?

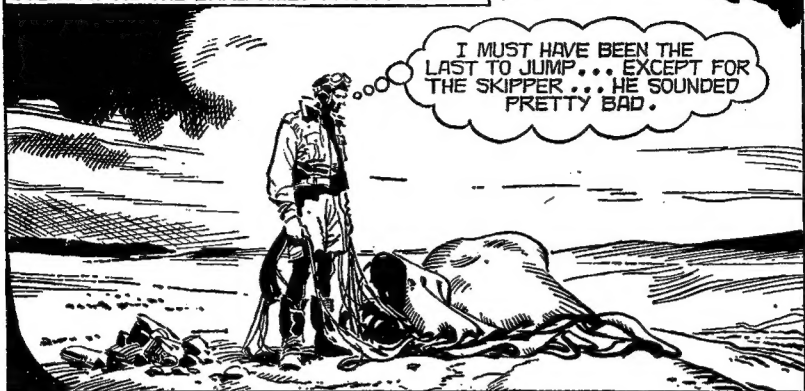
GEORGE COONEY KEPT UP A JUDDERING FIRE AT THE SKY-SWOOPING ENEMY UNTIL HIS GUNS CREAKED WITH THE HEAT.



THEN CAME A GASPING, PAIN-RACKED ORDER FROM HIS SKIPPER...



FIGHTING THROUGH THE SMOKE, COONEY SAW NO SIGN OF THE REST OF THE CREW. WHEN HIS PARACHUTE EASED HIM TO THE GROUND, IT WAS TO FIND HIMSELF AS ALONE AND SOLITARY AS THE BARE HILLS AROUND HIM.



HE REMEMBERED GLIMPSED MOVEMENT, THE FLUTTERING ROBES OF NATIVES, A VILLAGE PERHAPS, HE JUDGED THE DIRECTION WITH FARM-BRED INTUITION AND SET OUT...



A FIVE-MILE TRUDGE HAD CHANGED THE ROUND HILLS TO A STEEP-SIDED ESCARPMENT. CAVE-LIKE HOLES WERE DUG IN THE FACE OF IT... ARABS... WATER...



THE ARABS TOOK HIM TO THE WATER. A BIG BONY GIANT IN FILTHY ROBES PRODDED HIM THERE AT THE KNIFE-POINT.





IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT IT HAD BEGUN AS AN ARAB JOKE, STRAPPING THE FLYING MAN TO THE WELL-SHAFT AND BEATING HIM ROUND AND ROUND...



... BUT COONEY HAD COLLAPSED TOO SOON, EVEN FOR A DESPISED INFIDEL.

IT WAS NOT MUSCULAR EXHAUSTION THAT DESTROYED COONEY, NOR THE HEAT... IT WAS THE ENDLESS CIRCLING, THE SICK NAUSEA. AS A CHILD, HE HAD BEEN TOLD IT WAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH HIS EARS...



WAS THIS THE REPAYMENT THAT WAS NOW DEMANDED OF HIM...? THE PRICE FOR CHEATING HIS WAY INTO THE AIR FORCE?



AND NOW TO THE JEERS OF THESE ARABS HE FELL AGAIN AND AGAIN IN A TORMENT OF DIZZINESS.

HE HAS NOT
THE STRENGTH OF
A RABBIT!

HIS KNEES
ARE AS GRASS!



THE JEERING CEASED AT THE SIGHT OF
DISTANT DUST SPIRALS. THEY PROVED
TO BE A GERMAN MOTORISED PATROL.
IN HOSTILE SILENCE, THE ARABS
WATCHED IT GRIND TO A STANDSTILL...

HALT!



LEUTNANT WERKE EYED THOSE COLD ARAB STARES WITH SHARP CAUTION. SENT ON A TWO-DAY TREK INTO THE DUSTY WASTES, HE HAD COME FOR WATER... AND NOT FOR TROUBLE.

WHAT DEVIL'S MISCHIEF
ARE THESE FLEA-RIDDEN VERMIN
UP TO NOW ?

DISMOUNTING FROM HIS SCOUT CAR, HE CAME FORWARD WARILY. ONE LOOK AT THE SICK WRECK TIED TO THE WELL-SHAFT TOLD HIM THAT HE WAS FACING WHAT HE ALWAYS FEARED — THE IRREGULAR.

HIMMEL ! THERE IS NOTHING
IN MY INSTRUCTIONS THAT DEALS
WITH SUCH AS THIS.



FOR A LONG MINUTE, LEUTNANT WERKE WRESTLED WITH THE PROBLEM. THEN TO COVER HIS INDECISION, HE ADOPTED A HARSH LINE...



THE WILTING AND SWEAT-GRIMED FIGURE OF GEORGE COONEY WAS CUT LOOSE AND BORNE AWAY, FOLLOWED BY ANGRY SHOUTS AND HURLED ABUSE...



WHEN DARK FELL, LEUTNANT WERKE ORDERED CAMP. BY NOW IT HAD OCCURRED TO HIS TIDY MIND WHAT TO DO ABOUT HIS UNUSUAL PRISONER...



Chapter 2. RESCUE!

THE WEARY GEORGE COONEY WAS GIVEN A BLANKET AND A CURT 'GUTE NACHT'. FALLING INTO A FITFUL SLEEP, THE CANADIAN SHED THE BURDEN OF HIS MORTAL PLIGHT AND TOOK WING ON A LONG RETURN JOURNEY...



BACK TO THE RANGING FARMLANDS OF ONTARIO, TO THE SCENES OF HIS BOYHOOD AND YOUTH.



IN HIS DREAM, HE SAW HIMSELF STRAIGHTENING FROM THE ENDLESS BEAN ROWS AND WIPING THE SWEAT FROM HIS EYES. EIGHTY THOUSAND ACRES OF BEANS — THAT WAS ONTARIO...

LUCKY
DEVIL TO BE UP
THERE...



THERE WERE TIMES HE REMEMBERED WHEN PLANES FLEW OVER — BIG PLANES. HE WOULD EYE THEM WISTFULLY...

GEE, TO
BE IN ONE OF
THOSE!



AND TO HIM, STANDING THERE, PYGMIED BY THE VASTNESS OF THE BEAN CROP, THOSE PLANES SPELT A MAGIC DELIVERANCE, A WAFTING AWAY FROM HIS EARTHBOUND DRABNESS...

BOY, LOOK
AT THAT BABY
GO!

... AT SUCH TIMES THE SOUL OF GEORGE DANIEL COONEY CRIED ALOUD FOR RELEASE, FOR THE WIDER WORLD BEYOND THE ROLLING UPLANDS.

THEN, LIKE A BUGLE CALL OF HOPE CAME THE SECOND WORLD WAR... FRANCE ROSE TO MEET THE GERMAN AGGRESSOR... BRITAIN AWOK TO HER PERIL... TO ARMS!



AND WITH THAT CHALLENGING CALL, THERE CAME TO GEORGE COONEY A FIERCE DETERMINATION TO QUIT BEAN ROWS AND TO FIB AND FIDDLE HIS WAY INTO BRITAIN'S ROYAL AIR FORCE. SO HE WORKED HIS PASSAGE TO ENGLAND...



AND FIB AND FIDDLE GEORGE COONEY DID UNTIL THE GREAT DAY CAME WHEN HE COULD LOOK UP AT THE TAIL GUNS OF A VICKERS WELLINGTON WITH POSSESSIVE PRIDE... AND A SECRET GUILT.

YOU'RE ALL MINE,
FELLAS... LUCKY
I GOT INTO BOMBERS...
NOBODY WILL GUESS
I GET TROUBLE WITH
SPIN!



AS TAIL-GUN CHARLIE, COONEY
HAD A SPELL OF OPERATIONS
OVER GERMANY AND THEN CAME
A CHANGE TO THE SUN-BLINDING
LANDS OF THE NORTH AFRICAN
DESERT.

WELLINGTONS DON'T
SPIN AROUND LIKE THOSE
CRAZY HURRICANES. SO
LONG AS I STICK TO
BOMBERS I SHAN'T
GET DIZZY.

SUDDENLY COONEY FELT HIMSELF
SHAKEN BY THE SHOULDER.

WITH A STARTLED GRUNT HE WOKE UP. IT WAS LEUTNANT WERKE. INSTANTLY
HIS FLIGHT CAME FLOODING BACK. HE BLINKED IN THE EARLY SUNLIGHT...

AN OFFIZIER
HAS ARRIVED FROM
HEADQUARTERS TO SEE
YOU ... COME !

Point Blank

MAJOR ERNST STOLHEIM WAS MORE INQUISITIVE THAN LEUTNANT WERKE. IT WAS HIS JOB TO BE, FOR HE WAS ONE OF THE GENERAL STAFF INTELLIGENCE. NOW IN RESPONSE TO WERKE'S WORRIED SIGNAL HE HAD ARRIVED, ALL CURIOUS...



THE QUESTIONING BEGAN. AND WHEN COONEY GOT TO THE POINT ABOUT THE ARAB WELL AND THE ENDLESS CIRCLING, THE WILY GERMAN MAJOR READ THE SYMPTOMS...



THE MAJOR NODDED UNDERSTANDINGLY, AND GEORGE COONEY IN HIS SIMPLICITY THOUGHT HE DETECTED SYMPATHY.

MAJOR STOLHEIM ASKED HIMSELF, COULD HE NOT USE THIS CANADIAN'S FEAR OF DIZZINESS AS A WEAPON, SOMETHING WITH WHICH TO MAKE THIS COONEY DO AS HE WAS TOLD? ALOUD, HE SAID...

A PROPOSITION, MEIN FREUND—I WILL OFFER YOU GOOD FOOD, REASONABLE COMFORT—IN RETURN YOU WILL GET YOUR FELLOW-PRISONERS TO TALK—THERE WILL BE MICROPHONES...

WHAAAT?



INDIGNATION AND A NIGHT'S REST SUDDENLY REVIVED COONEY A GREAT DEAL. HIS FIGHTING SPIRIT RETURNED...

YOU WANT ME AS A STOOL PIGEON...? YOU'VE GOT A HOPE, BUSTER!



WITH A DECEPTIVE SMILE, MAJOR STOLHEIM
SIGNED TO THE ATTENTIVE WERKE, AND...



WHEN GEORGE COONEY OPENED HIS THROBBING EYES IT WAS TO FIND
HIMSELF BACK AT THE SCENE OF HIS RECENT TORMENT—SLUMPED OVER
THE HATED WELL-SHAFT.



LIEUTENANT WERKE WAS HAPPY. WHY HE NOT CLEAR AND PRECISE ORDERS TO ACT UPON? HE WAS TO MAKE THIS CANADIAN CIRCLE THIS WELL UNTIL HE DROPPED... HE CHANGED HIS STUBBORN MIND. SO...

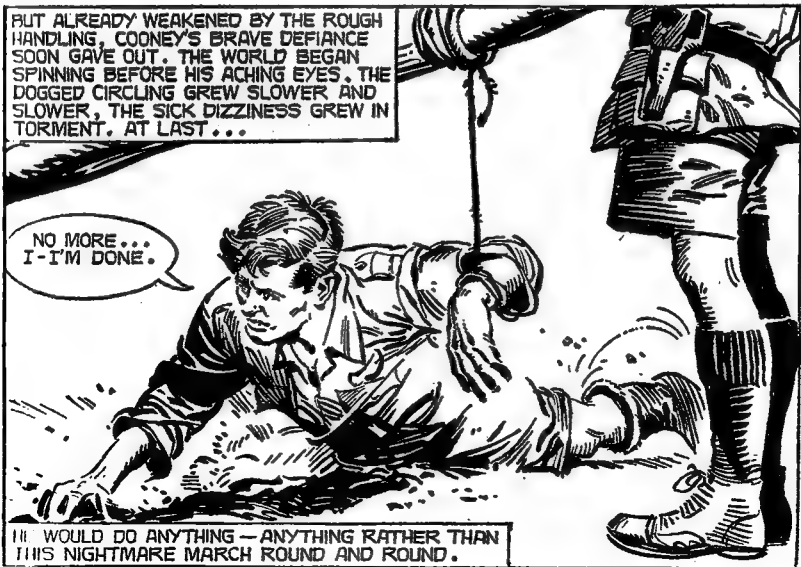
I SAID, PUSH
THAT SHAFT...!
BEGIN!

WITH A SHOW OF BRAVADO,
GEORGE COONEY BEGAN.



BUT ALREADY WEAKENED BY THE ROUGH HANDLING, COONEY'S BRAVE DEFIANCE SOON GAVE OUT. THE WORLD BEGAN SPINNING BEFORE HIS ACHING EYES. THE DOGGED CIRCLING GREW SLOWER AND SLOWER, THE SICK DIZZINESS GREW IN TORMENT. AT LAST...

NO MORE...
I-I'M DONE.



HE WOULD DO ANYTHING — ANYTHING RATHER THAN
THIS NIGHTMARE MARCH ROUND AND ROUND.

Chapter 3.

STOOL PIGEON

A BROKEN MAN, COONEY WAS DRIVEN TO THE GERMAN STAFF HEADQUARTERS AT AGOULA, A ONE-TIME FASHIONABLE WATERFRONT, BUT NOW OCCUPIED BY THE ELITE OF ROMMEL'S AFRIKA KORPS...

YOU GERMANS DO YOURSELVES WELL...

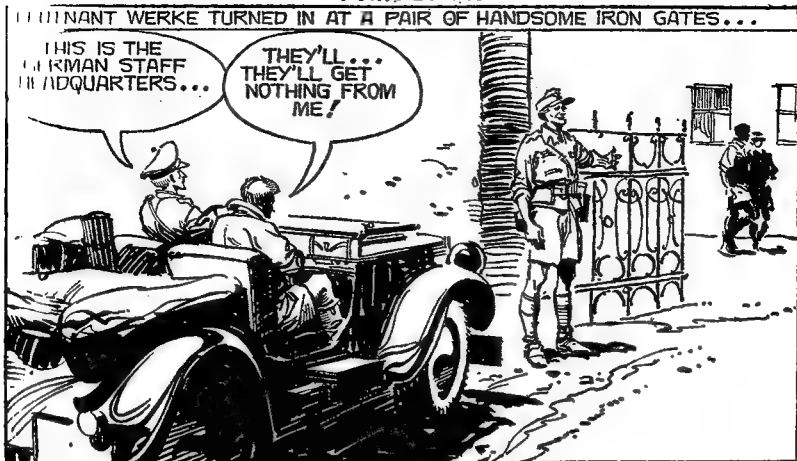
WE LIVE LIKE KINGS, ENGLANDER!



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROAD, THE GERMANS HAD CLEARED A STRETCH OF UNDULATING DESERT TO MAKE AN AIRFIELD. EVEN IN HIS DEPRESSED STATE, COONEY WAS STILL INTERESTED IN IT...

I BET THOSE ARE THE STUKAS THAT'RE BEATING THE SHIRTS OFF OUR FRONT-LINE TROOPS...





STOLHEIM'S SMILE STAYED SMOOTHLY UNALTERED BY THIS RETORT...



THE MAJOR'S MANICURED FINGERS POINTED ARROGANTLY TOWARDS A MICROPHONE WHICH LAY ON HIS DESK...





HAUNTED BY THIS FRIGHTFUL ALTERNATIVE, GEORGE COONEY GAVE WAY. TAKEN TO NEARBY QUARTERS, HE BRACED HIMSELF FOR HIS UNSAVOURY ROLE — A BETRAYER OF HIS OWN COMRADES ...



IN A MOMENT, COONEY MET THE FIRST MAN STOLHEIM MEANT HIM TO BETRAY — A HURRICANE PILOT. WELL AWARE OF THE LISTENING MICROPHONES, TALK CAME NONE TOO EASILY TO THE UNHAPPY CANADIAN.





AFTER AN HOUR OF UNEASY SILENCE BETWEEN THEM, MORRIS WAS TAKEN AWAY. GEORGE COONEY FELT ASHAMED, DETERMINED TO FIND SOME WAY TO CHEAT THE GERMANS...

STOLHEIM'S GOT ME HOG-TIED. BUT I'VE GOT TO CUT MYSELF LOOSE SOMEHOW...



FOR A FEW DAYS, NO MORE ENGLISH PRISONERS WERE TAKEN. COONEY WAS GIVEN LIMITED FREEDOM. DAILY HE HEARD THE REVVING OF THE GERMAN AIRCRAFT ACROSS THE ROAD...

THAT MUST BE THE STUKAS WARMING UP.



THE NEXT DAY, COONEY LOOKED UP TO GREET MORRIS'S NEXT CATCH, AND GOT A SHOCK. IT WAS A PILOT FROM HIS OWN WELLINGTON SQUADRON!



UNLIKE THE CAUTIOUS MORRIS, THIS FRESH CAPTIVE BLURTED OUT A FLOW OF WORDS... AND EVERY SYLLABLE HE UTTERED WAS PICKED UP BY A LURKING MICROPHONE.



AS COONEY SAID IT, HE SAW A SUDDEN WAVE OF HORROR PASS OVER NEWTON'S FACE...



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IN A FLASH, COONEY SAW THE REASON FOR NEWTON'S ALARM—THEY, TOO, WOULD BE BOMBED WITH THE AIRFIELD. ALL MICROPHONES FORGOTTEN, HE ASKED THE FATAL QUESTION...

WHEN ?

THEY'RE COMING
TONIGHT—AT DUSK !

INSTANTLY, COONEY COULD HAVE BITTEN HIS TONGUE. SHOCKED REALISATION SEIZED HIM...

WE'VE GIVEN IT
AWAY ! THE BRITISH
RAID WILL BE A
FAILURE !

TOO LATE, THE VITAL INFORMATION WAS OUT... HE COULD PICTURE THE GLEEFUL STOLHEIM...

COONEY WAS RIGHT. MAJOR STOLHEIM
SUMMONED HIM IN HIGH GOOD HUMOUR...

CAPITAL, MY FRIEND...!
SO THE BRITISH WELLINGTONS
COME AT DUSK, EH?

TAKE YOUR
HANDS OFF
ME!



UNAFFECTED BY THE CANADIAN'S SCORN, MAJOR STOLHEIM'S WORDS
CAME AS SMOOTHLY AS EVER...

ALREADY THE WIRES HAVE BEEN
BUSY, MY LITTLE STOOL PIGEON. A
SWARM OF OUR FIGHTER PLANES
IS ALREADY AIRBORNE!





STOLHEIM HAD A FURTHER DEMAND TO MAKE ON THE ANGRY COONEY...



FURY STREAKED STOLHEIM'S FEATURES...



GEORGE COONEY'S THOUGHTS WERE WORKING OVERTIME AS HE WAS MARCHED BACK TO HIS ROOM...



NEWTON SEEMED TO BE WAITING FOR HIS RETURN WITH SOME IMPATIENCE. HE CAUGHT SIGHT OF COONEY'S PALE FACE...

ANYTHING WRONG, COONEY? YOU LOOK AS IF YOU'VE HAD THE FRIGHT OF YOUR LIFE!



WHILE HE MADE SOME REPLY, COONEY SCRIBBLED ON A SCRAP OF PAPER. HE HAD TO HOPE THAT NO HIDDEN OBSERVER WOULD SEE HIM PASS THE NOTE TO NEWTON...

*Walls have
ears—
talk phoney
gen.*



IT WAS CLEAR FROM NEWTON'S EXPRESSION THAT HE UNDERSTOOD. COONEY PUT THE QUESTION AS STOLHEIM HAD ORDERED...



NEWTON GAVE A CRAFTY WINK...



COONEY SENSED THAT NEWTON HAD ONE THING IN MIND—A CHANCE TO ESCAPE. THEY WERE NOT SURPRISED WHEN A SUMMONS CAME FROM MAJOR STOLHEIM...



PORTED BACK TO THEIR ROOM,
HAWTON MUTTERED A FEW
WORDS TO COONEY. THEY WERE
FULL OF MEANING FOR THE ALERT
CANADIAN...

DON'T WORRY
YOU WON'T BE AT
THE AIRFIELD
TO SEE US OFF,
COONEY.

DON'T WORRY
ABOUT ME,
PAL.

NO
TALKING!



Chapter 4.

THE BREAK

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, STOLHEIM DROVE THROUGH THE CAMP GATES WITH NEWTON BESIDE HIM. WATCHING THEM, GEORGE COONEY STEELED HIMSELF FOR ACTION...



SUDDENLY, HE HEARD THE VIOLENT COUGHING SPLUTTER OF A PLANE IN TROUBLE...



COONEY'S GUESS WAS CORRECT. TOO LOW TO BALE OUT AND TOO DAMAGED TO CLIMB, THE GERMAN PILOT RADIOED HIS FRANTIC INSTRUCTIONS...

CLEAR
THE RUNWAY!
I AM GOING TO
CRASH LAND!



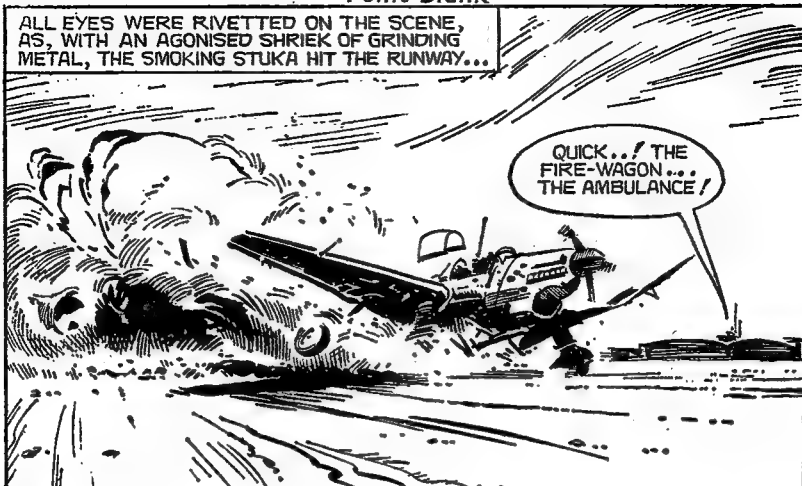
THE STUKA FLATTENED OUT A FEW FEET ABOVE THE GROUND AS STOLHEIM AND NEWTON DROVE THROUGH THE AIRFIELD TOWARD IT...

HICK, THAT
STUKA'S REALLY
IN TROUBLE!

YOU SEEM
PLEASED,
HERR NEWTON!



ALL EYES WERE RIVETTED ON THE SCENE, AS, WITH AN AGONISED SHRIEK OF GRINDING METAL, THE SMOKING STUKA HIT THE RUNWAY...



SEIZING ON THIS SUDDEN DISTRACTION, GEORGE COONEY MOVED SWIFTLY...



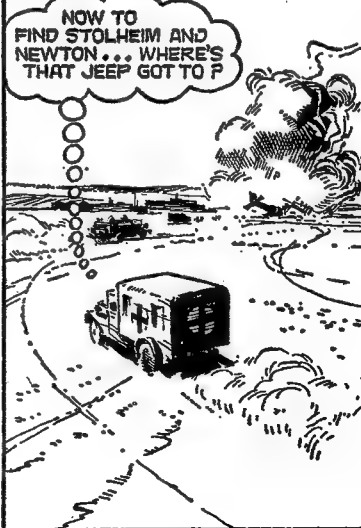
A MOMENT LATER, COONEY WAS HURLING THE AMBULANCE THROUGH THE GATES. THINKING THE VEHICLE WAS RUSHING TO SAVE THE CRASHED STUKA PILOT, THE GUARDS SPRANG CLEAR...



ACTING UNDER THE SAME MISTAKEN IMPRESSION, THE AIRFIELD GUARD SPRANG TO LET THE AMBULANCE THROUGH.



COONEY SPED ACROSS THE AIRFIELD, BUT HE WAS NOT LOOKING AT THE CRASHED PLANE...



SUDDENLY HE SAW THE PAIR STANDING
BESIDE STOLHEIM'S PLANE. HIS HEART
BEAT FASTER...

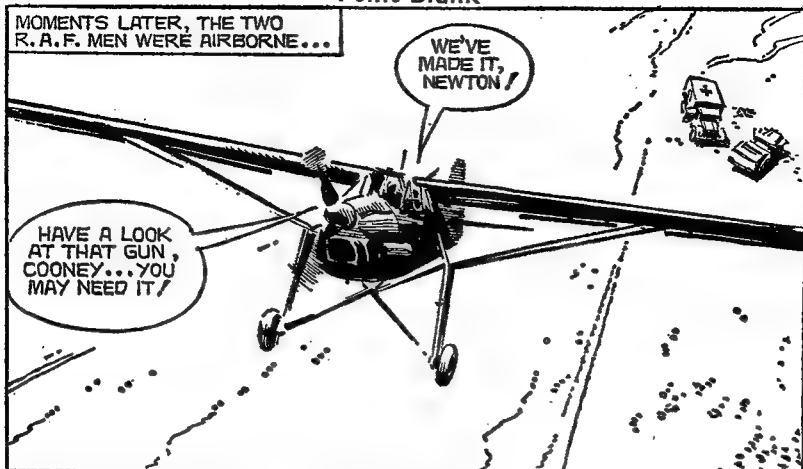


COONEY GUNNED THE MOTOR OF THE AMBULANCE
AND SWEEPED UP IN A FLURRY OF DUST...



BUT STOLHEIM'S OUTBURST WAS CUT SHORT BY
NEWTON'S READY FIST.

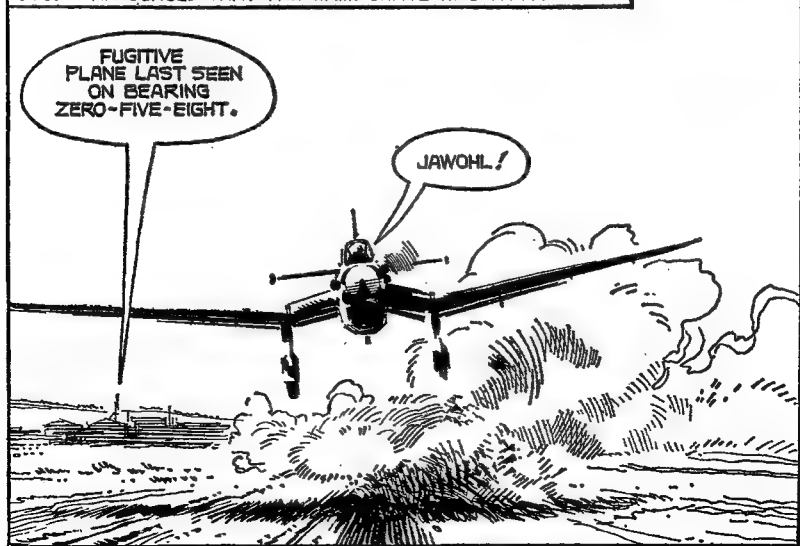




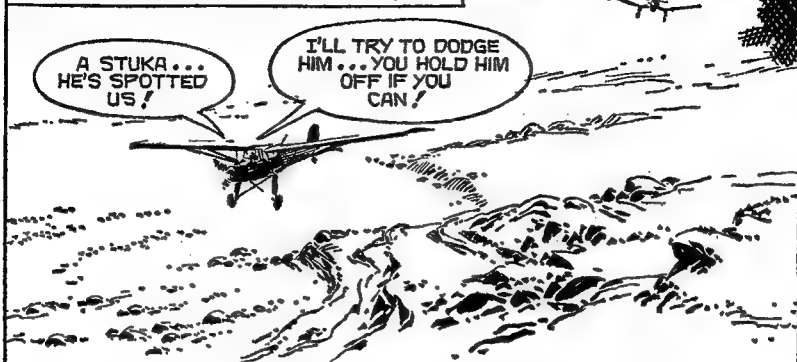
TO THE JUBILANT PAIR IN THE
COMMANDEERED PLANE, THE WHOLE
THING SEEMED ALMOST TOO EASY...



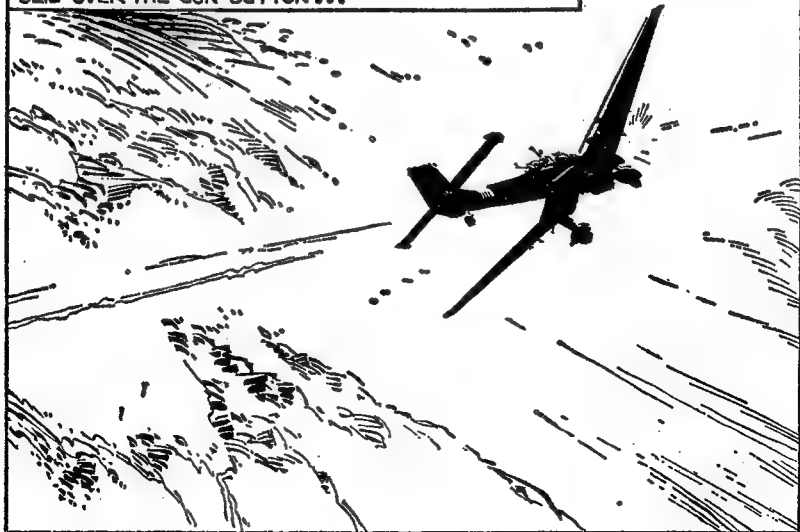
BACK ON THE AIRFIELD, THE VENOMOUS ROAR OF A CLIMBING
STUKA ANNOUNCED THAT THE GRIM CHASE WAS ON...



NEWTON HAD GUESSED THAT PURSUIT WAS INEVITABLE. HE STEERED A ZIG-ZAG COURSE TO THROW POSSIBLE HUNTERS OFF THE TRACK. BUT THE SUPERIOR SPEED OF THE SEARCHING STUKA AT LAST BROUGHT IT WITHIN RANGE OF THE FUGITIVE PLANE...



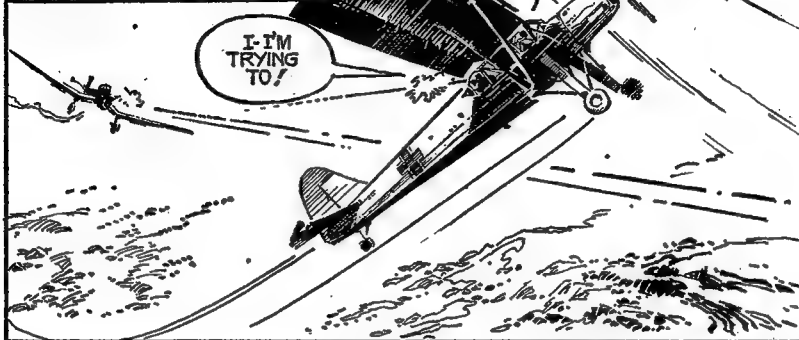
WITH THE COLD PRECISION OF A PRACTISED KILLER, THE STUKA PILOT POUNCED ON HIS QUARRY. HIS THUMB SLID OVER THE GUN-BUTTON...



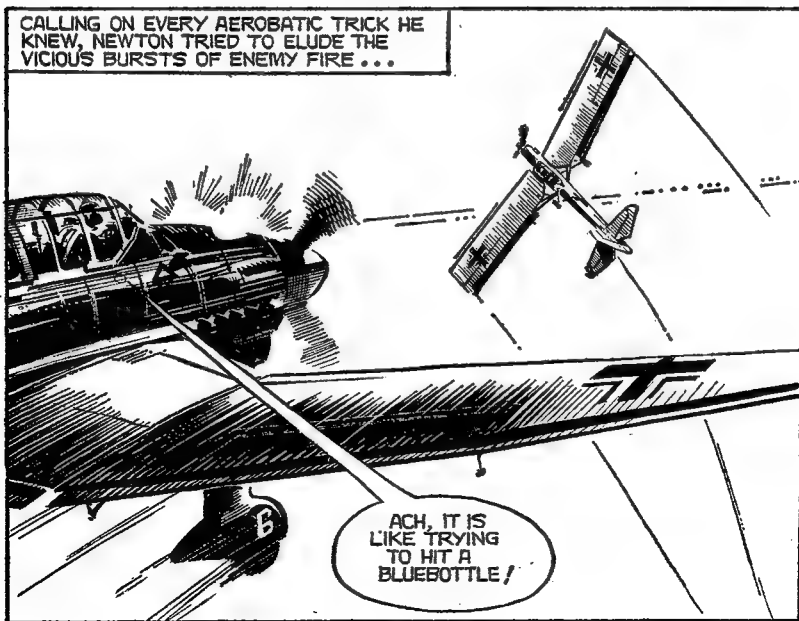
NEWTON SAW THE GLOWING CANNON-TRACER FLOAT PAST HIS HEAD. WITH A STARTLED SHOUT, HE SENT THE LITTLE PLANE INTO A TWISTING CLIMB...

KEEP FIRING, COONEY... KEEP FIRING!

I-I'M TRYING TO!



CALLING ON EVERY AEROBATIC TRICK HE KNEW, NEWTON TRIED TO ELUDE THE VICIOUS BURSTS OF ENEMY FIRE...



ACH, IT IS LIKE TRYING TO HIT A BLUEBOTTLE!

FEELING NO MOVEMENT IN THE GUNNER'S SEAT BEHIND HIM, NEWTON YELLED ANGRILY...

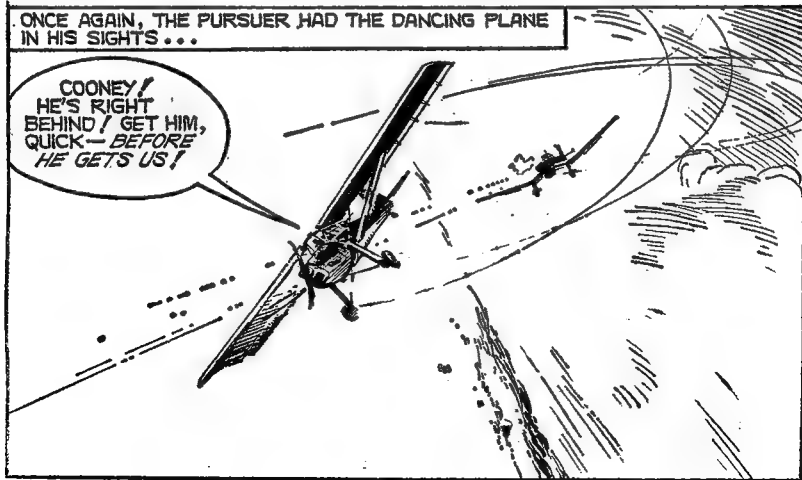
KEEP FIRING,
COONEY!

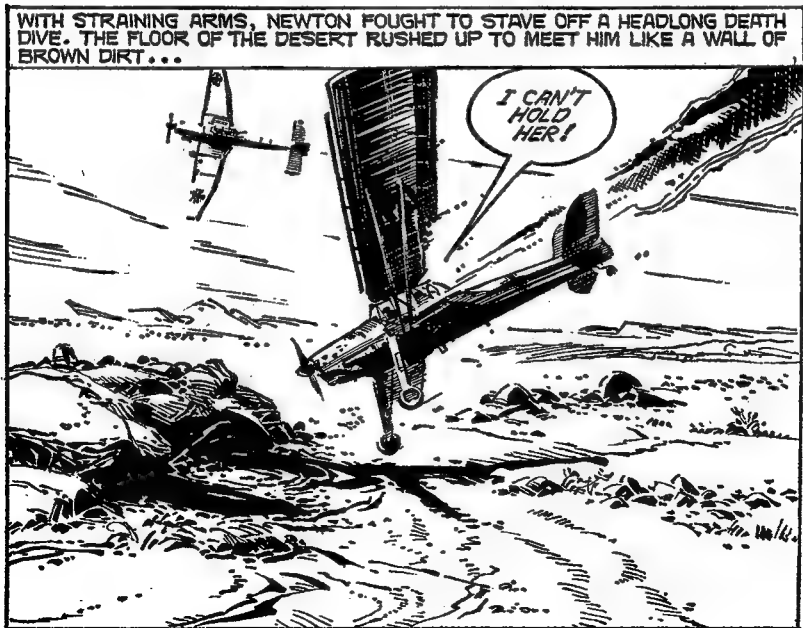
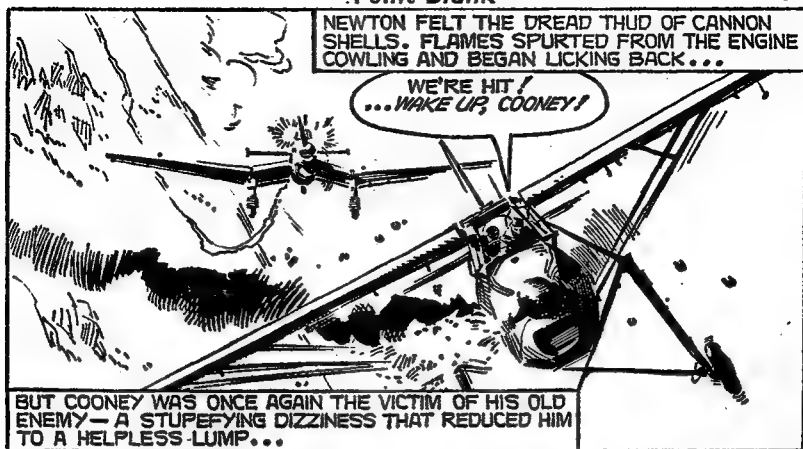
I-I CAN'T...

COONEY'S VOICE TRAILED OFF. HIS MIND WAS REELING. THIS VIOLENT TWISTING AND TURNING WAS TOO MUCH FOR HIM...

ONCE AGAIN, THE PURSUER HAD THE DANCING PLANE IN HIS SIGHTS...

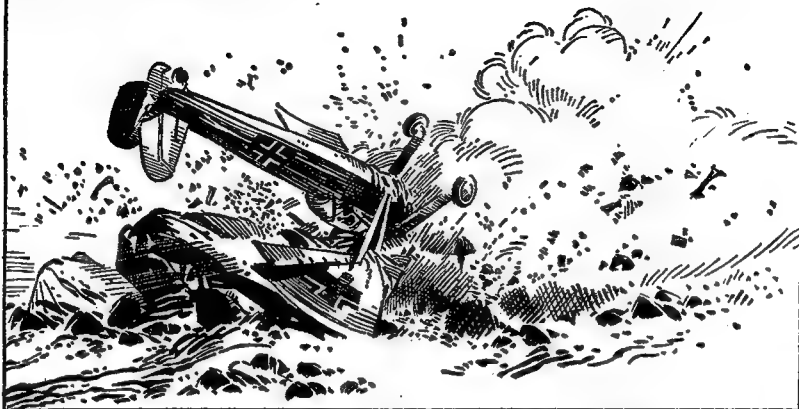
COONEY!
HE'S RIGHT
BEHIND! GET HIM,
QUICK—BEFORE
HE GETS US!





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IN A FRENZY OF CONFUSION AND SCREAMING BRAKES, THE FIESELER STORCH HIT THE GROUND WITH A BOUNCING SHOCK... AND PLUNGED INTO A ROCKY OUTCROP.



IT WAS THE OMINOUS CRACKLE OF FLAMES THAT STUNG GEORGE COONEY TO LIFE. STILL FEELING SICK AND WEAK, HE HAD TO SUMMON EVERY LAST OUNCE OF STRENGTH TO DRAG THE LIMP FORM OF BOBBY NEWTON FREE FROM THE FURNACE OF THE SHATTERED PLANE...



COONEY WAS GRIPPED BY A BLACK DESPAIR AS HE HEARD THE PILOT'S SENSELESS MURMURS...

HE'S IN A BAD WAY! IF ONLY I'D KEPT MY HEAD WE'D HAVE FOUGHT OFF THAT STUKA...



WAS HE PAYING YET AGAIN, HE ASKED HIMSELF, FOR HIS INITIAL MISTAKE OF CHEATING HIS WAY INTO THE R.A.F.? THIS TIME HE HAD FAILED A COMRADE...

IT WAS CLEAR BOBBY NEWTON WAS IN NO STATE TO MAKE A LONG TREK ACROSS THE DESERT. THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING FOR IT—COONEY PICKED HIM UP AND SLUNG THE LIMP BODY OVER HIS SHOULDER...

WE'LL KEEP GOING NORTH, BOBBY... BOUND TO HIT TRACKS SOME TIME.



THE OVEN-HOT SAND PENETRATED TO THE VERY SOLES OF HIS FEET, BUT COONEY WAS HARDLY CONSCIOUS OF THE AGONY. ONE THING WAS ON HIS MIND—THE HORROR OF THE AMBUSH THAT WOULD AWAIT HIS OWN SQUADRON OVER THE GERMAN AIRFIELD AT AJOU LA /



FROM SOMEWHERE, GEORGE COONEY FOUND THE STRENGTH FOR THE PAIR OF THEM TO KEEP GOING. AT LAST, WITH SWEAT-MISTED EYES, HE SPOTTED A MOVEMENT...



IT WAS A SOUTH AFRICAN PATROL THAT SPOTTED THE STUMBLING FIGURES... HUMAN FLOTSAM FLUNG UP BY THE VAST DESERT SEA ...



Chapter 5. FINAL PAYMENT

THAT AFTERNOON, GEORGE COONEY SAW THE INJURED NEWTON PLACED IN SAFE HANDS. BUT THERE WAS NO PEACE FOR THE CANADIAN UNTIL HE HAD HEARD THE REASSURING TONES OF HIS WING-COMMANDER ...



LOOK, SIR, THIS IS URGENT, LIFE AND DEATH! DON'T TAKE OFF FOR AJOULA TONIGHT!

OKAY, COONEY, CALM DOWN... TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT...

WING-COMMANDER CAMPBELL WAS SO INTRIGUED BY COONEY'S STORY THAT HE HIMSELF CAME TO FETCH THE CANADIAN BACK TO CAMP. IN THE MEANTIME, CAMPBELL HAD BEEN DOING SOME THINKING...

WE'LL STILL BOMB THE STUKAS AT AJOULA TONIGHT—BUT WE'LL DO IT AN HOUR LATER. BY THEN THE JERRY FIGHTERS WAITING FOR US WILL BE GETTING SHORT OF FUEL.



GOSH! THOSE HUNS WILL BE MAD! I CAN'T WAIT FOR IT!

IT WAS PLAIN TO THE AMUSED CAMPBELL THAT THIS TOUGH CANADIAN HAD NO INTENTION OF BEING LEFT OUT OF THE TRIP, SO AS THEY REACHED THEIR AIRFIELD...



OKAY, COONEY, YOU CAN COME ALONG... WE'RE SHORT OF A REAR GUNNER ANYWAY.

GREAT!

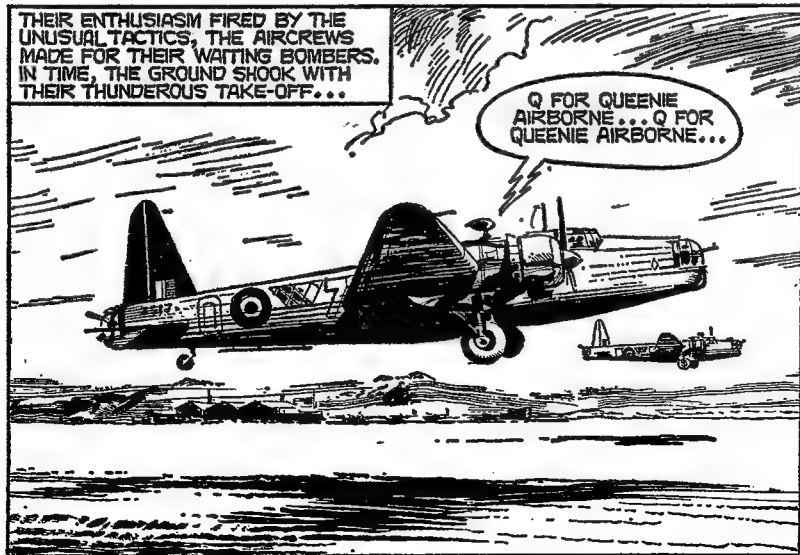
AFTER A QUICK MEAL, CAMPBELL ASKED COONEY TO TELL HIS STORY TO THE ASSEMBLED AIRCREWS. THEN HE SPOKE HIMSELF... THANKS TO COONEY, WE'LL GIVE THE HUNS A FRIGHT AND NOT VICE VERSA. WE TAKE OFF AN HOUR LATER—BY WHICH TIME JERRY WILL BE GETTING ANXIOUS ABOUT HIS FUEL.



JUST AS THE JERRY FIGHTERS ARE GIVING UP, WE'LL MAKE OUR APPROACH... THAT'LL MAKE THEM STAY AND EAT UP MORE FUEL. THEN WE'LL TURN AWAY AND COME BACK TEN MINUTES LATER—WHEN JERRY'S FUEL WILL BE ABOUT ZERO!



THEIR ENTHUSIASM FIRED BY THE UNUSUAL TACTICS, THE AIRCREWS MADE FOR THEIR WAITING BOMBERS. IN TIME, THE GROUND SHOOK WITH THEIR THUNDEROUS TAKE-OFF...



Q FOR QUEENIE AIRBORNE... Q FOR QUEENIE AIRBORNE...

TUCKED BEHIND THE TAIL GUNS OF A FOR ABLE, GEORGE COONEY GRINNED AS THE BOMBER'S POWERFUL ENGINE NOTE REACHED A CRESCENDO...



AT LONG LAST CAME A SOUND FOR WHICH THE GERMAN GROUND CONTROL HAD BEEN WAITING—THE RHYTHMIC THROBBING OF BRITISH PEGASUS ENGINES. BUT NO GERMAN EAR HEARD CAMPBELL'S TERSE SIGNAL...

RIGHT, CHAPS... FOLLOW ME FOR THE SIXPENNY TOUR!



HAVING MADE HIS DUMMY APPROACH, CAMPBELL NOW LED HIS BOMBERS AWAY IN A CIRCLING MOVEMENT...

MEANWHILE, AT AJOULA, THE GERMAN FIGHTERS LYING IN WAIT FOR THE LONG-EXPECTED BOMBERS HAD BEGUN TO GROW RESTIVE...



Point Blank

IN THE GERMAN GROUND CONTROL CABIN, FACES WERE BAFFLED AND ANGRY...

HIMMEL, ARE THE STUPID ENGLANDERS COMING TO BOMB US OR NOT? WHAT ARE THEY DOING?



THE LEADER OF THE FRUSTRATED MESSERSCHMITT FIGHTERS WAS IN NO MOOD TO SYMPATHISE...

I TELL YOU THE BRITISH BOMBERS HAVE FADED!

DOLT! INCOMPETENT! WE HAVE FIFTEEN MINUTES FUEL LEFT... *FIND THOSE BOMBERS!*



GUESSING THE CONFUSION HIS DUMMY APPROACH WAS CAUSING IN THE GERMAN CAMP, CAMPBELL COMPLETED THE CIRCUIT AND ISSUED FRESH ORDERS.

OKAY, BOYS...IN WE GO!

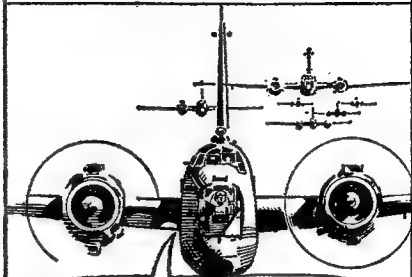


A MESSAGE CRACKED IN THE
EARPHONES OF STAFFEL
LEADER SCHMIDT...

ACHTUNG!
ENEMY BOMBERS
APPROACHING
ONCE MORE!

... AND WHAT
DO YOU EXPECT US
TO USE FOR FUEL?

CURSING, THE GERMAN LEADER
GROWLED ORDERS TO HIS PLANES TO
STAY ORBITTING. MOMENTS LATER,
THOSE CIRCLING SPECKS WAITING HIGH
IN AMBUSH WERE SPOTTED BY
CAMPBELL'S ROVING EYE...



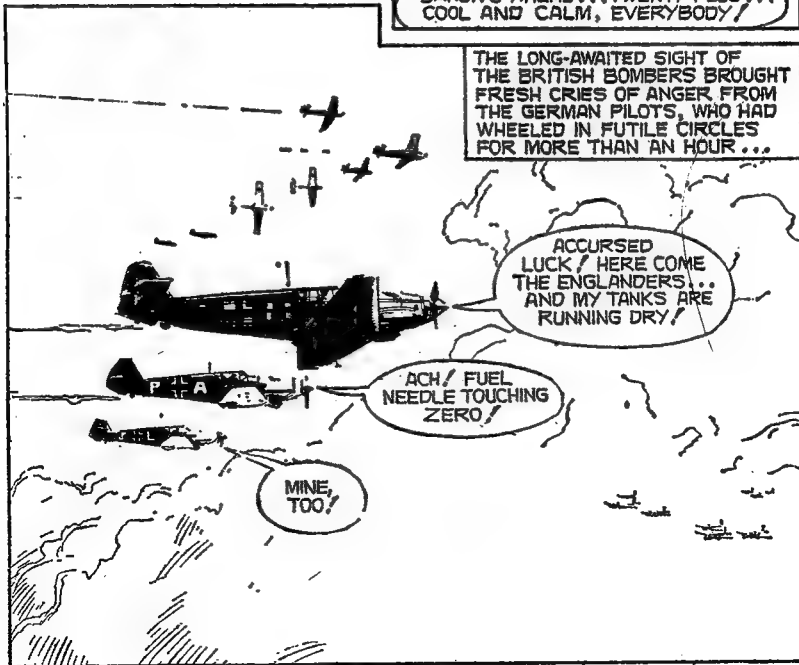
BANDITS AHEAD... TWENTY PLUS...
COOL AND CALM, EVERYBODY!

THE LONG-AWAITED SIGHT OF
THE BRITISH BOMBERS BROUGHT
FRESH CRIES OF ANGER FROM
THE GERMAN PILOTS, WHO HAD
WHEELED IN FUTILE CIRCLES
FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR...

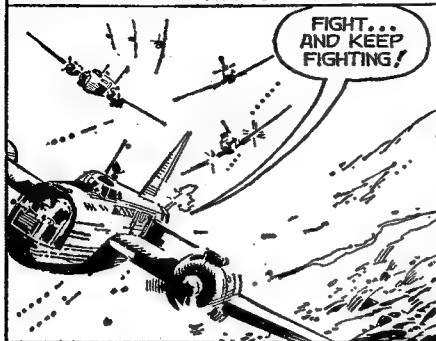
ACCURSED
LUCK! HERE COME
THE ENGLANDERS...
AND MY TANKS ARE
RUNNING DRY!

ACH! FUEL
NEEDLE TOUCHING
ZERO!

MINE,
TOO!



WITH AN EYE ON HIS OWN DROPPING FUEL GAUGE, STAFFEL LEADER SCHMIDT LED THE SNARLING ATTACK...



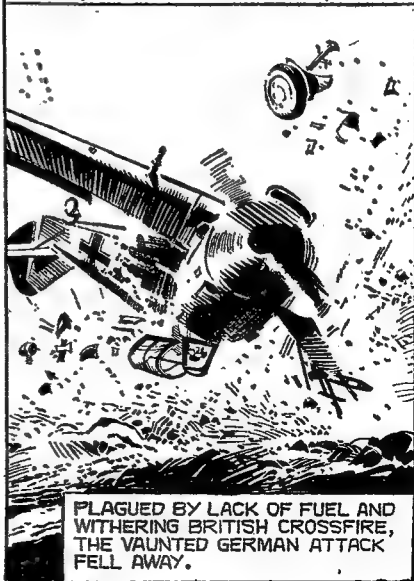
SUDDENLY, COONEY FOUND A MESSERSCHMITT FLASHING PAST HIS SIGHTS. HIS TRIGGER FINGER JERKED AND...



CLIMBING TO ATTACK ANOTHER WELLINGTON, SCHMIDT'S MOTOR, STARVED OF FUEL, COUGHED AND SPAT IN PROTEST. IN THAT FATAL SECOND OF HESITATION, A BRITISH GUN PINNED HIM...



ANOTHER ENEMY FIGHTER, LEAKING PRECIOUS FUEL FROM BULLET RIPPED TANKS, TRIED TO CRASH-LAND, BUT...



GRIMLY SATISFIED, WING-COMMANDER CAMPBELL NOW SET ABOUT THE REAL OBJECTIVE OF HIS MISSION—THE DESTRUCTION OF THE STUKA DIVE BOMBERS ON THE AJOULA AIRFIELD.



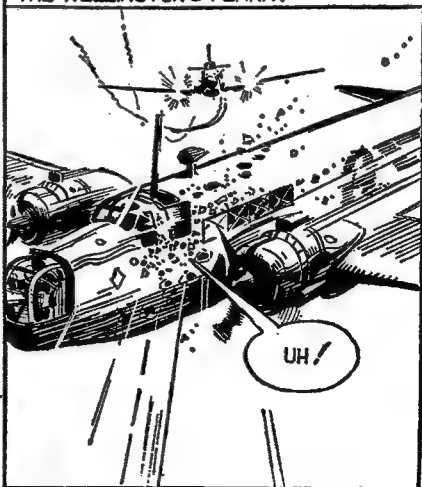
FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES, THE GERMAN AIRFIELD FELT THE FLAILING IMPACT OF BRITISH BOMBS AND BULLETS. THEN, AS THE ROAR OF WELLINGTONS DIED AWAY, A LONE VOICE WAS HEARD. IT WAS MAJOR ERNST STOLHEIM.



AT THAT MOMENT, COONEY WAS HAVING NO CHANCE TO REJOICE. A MESSERSCHMITT PILOT WITH HIS LAST OUNCES OF FUEL, WAS MAKING A FINAL DESPERATE ATTACK ON COONEY'S AIRCRAFT.



COONEY KEPT UP A HOSING STREAM OF FIRE, BUT EVEN AS THE MESSERSCHMITT FELL AWAY, ITS FINAL BURST TRACKED HAVOC ALONG THE WELLINGTON'S FLANK.



FEELING THE AIRCRAFT LURCH AND YAW, COONEY CALLED HIS CAPTAIN AND THEN HIS CREW-MATES... BUT THERE WAS NO REPLY!



THEN THE NOSE DIPPED SHARPLY, COONEY HEARD THAT DREAD MOUNTING WHINE OF AN AIRCRAFT GOING OUT OF CONTROL.



LEAVING THE REAR TURRET, COONEY STUMBLED TO THE FORWARD END OF THE PLANE... AND WENT PALE AT WHAT HE SAW...



COONEY STRUGGLED ON UNTIL HE CAME TO THE PILOT'S CABIN. FLYING OFFICER BRODY LAY CRUMPLED AS IF POLE-AXED.



A QUICK GLANCE SHOWED BRODY WAS STILL ALIVE. COONEY EXERTED ALL HIS STRENGTH TO HEAVE THE DAZED PILOT BACK INTO HIS SEAT.

WE'RE OUT OF CONTROL, SKIPPER...! DO SOMETHING!

I-I'M HIT...MY SHOULDER...

THROUGH THE WINDSCREEN, COONEY SAW A WHIRLING UNIVERSE THAT SLOWLY RIGHTED TO A LEVEL HORIZON; IT WAS ONLY THEN THAT HE REALISED HOW CLOSE THEY HAD COME TO DISASTER...

TELEPHONE WIRES!

GOOD GRIEF!

WITH COONEY'S HELP, BRODY FOUGHT TO RIGHT THE PLUNGING, SPINNING PLANE...

HELP ME PULL THE STICK BACK...! IT'LL BRING HER NOSE UP!

SHE'S COMING! I CAN FEEL IT!

AT THE WELLINGTON BASE, WING-COMMANDER CAMPBELL HAD WAITED ANXIOUSLY FOR THE LAST WELLINGTON...

HERE SHE IS!

SHE LOOKS BADLY SHOT UP!

WITH A PALE SET FACE, BRODY BROUGHT HIS AIRCRAFT TO A STANDSTILL. BESIDE HIM, SAT COONEY. HIS FACE ALIGHT WITH SURPRISE AND DELIGHT...



IT WAS THE BEST TRIP I'VE EVER HAD, SKIPPER...

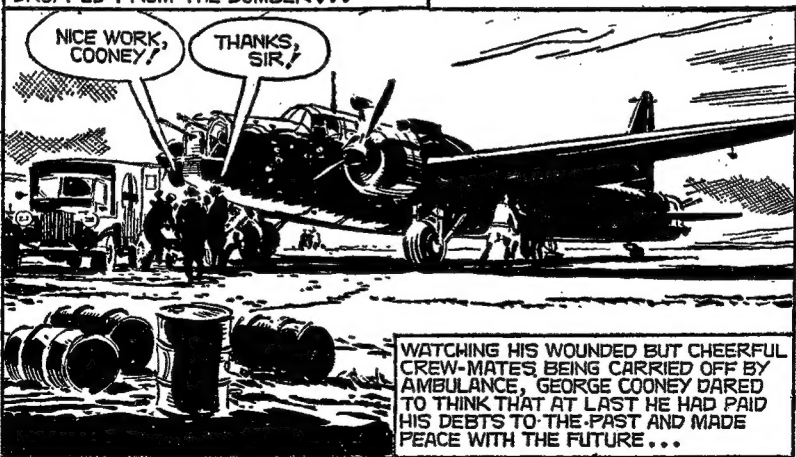
WING-COMMANDER CAMPBELL WAS THERE TO GREET COONEY AS THE CANADIAN DROPPED FROM THE BOMBER...

... WE WERE THROWN ABOUT ALL OVER THE SKY, YET - I FORGOT TO GET DIZZY!



A DARN GOOD THING FOR US YOU DIDN'T!

I'VE DONE IT! I WON'T GET GIDDY ANY MORE! BY JIMINY, I'VE GOT FLYING LICKED!



WATCHING HIS WOUNDED BUT CHEERFUL CREW-MATES BEING CARRIED OFF BY AMBULANCE, GEORGE COONEY DARED TO THINK THAT AT LAST HE HAD PAID HIS DEBTS TO THE PAST AND MADE PEACE WITH THE FUTURE...

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